



## Writing the Pain: Literature as Witness to Gendered Violence in India

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### ABSTRACT

The research focuses on how literature in India draws attention to the struggles and pain experienced by women. In a socio-cultural context where women's voices are often silenced by shame, fear, and patriarchal control, literary texts serve as a medium to express the unspoken and challenge dominant narratives. Using feminist theory and literary analysis, this study investigates how selected works of Githa Hariharan, among others, depict the trauma, resistance, and survival of women subjected to physical, emotional, and social violence. By examining novels such as *The Thousand Faces of Night*, *When Dreams Travel*, and *I Have Become the Tide*, this research reveals how female characters navigate silence, memory, and pain in a culture where their voices are often hidden or dismissed. These texts do not merely depict victimhood; instead, they emphasize how writing and storytelling become acts of reclaiming agency and dignity. Through these narratives, the silenced female body is transformed into a space of protest, resilience, and political expression. This paper contends that literature in India is not just a reflection of gender realities but also actively shapes discourses on justice, resistance, and empowerment. In a nation grappling with increasing cases of gender-based violence, literature serves as both a witness and an agent in the broader feminist movement. By depicting pain, Indian women writers not only document suffering but also foster awareness, empathy, and change.

**Keyword:** Feminist Literature, Gendered Violence, Literary Testimony, Resistance and Survival, Trauma and Memory, etc

### Introduction

Gendered violence in India is not merely a collection of isolated incidents but a systemic phenomenon deeply rooted in entrenched patriarchy, caste hierarchies, and cultural norms that regulate female bodies. From honor killings and dowry deaths to rape and domestic abuse, the trauma of gender-based violence affects women across regions and socio-economic strata.

In such a context, literature becomes a powerful site of witness and critique. As Cathy Caruth has suggested, trauma resists straightforward representation; it returns again and again through language, often in fragmented, disjunctive modes that reveal the depths of suffering (Caruth, 1996). Indian authors, especially feminists and marginalized voices, harness narrative strategies to explore pain, loss, survival, and resistance to gendered violence. This paper analyzes literature as testimony -both bearing witness to violence and giving voice to those who have been silenced.

## Literature Review

### Theoretical Framework: Witness and Trauma

The concept of *witnessing* in literature refers to texts that record and reflect traumatic experience without necessarily resolving it. Testimonial narratives assert the presence and agency of subjects who have been marginalized or objectified, aligning with Dori Laub's notion that bearing witness involves "the testimony of unspeakable events" (Laub, 1992).

Trauma theory, particularly as developed by Caruth and Laub, has been applied to postcolonial contexts where violence intersects with identity, memory, and historical silencing. In South Asia, scholars such as Gyan Prakash and Ananya Jahanara Kabir have extended trauma theory to examine how postcolonial literature narrates everyday violence (Prakash, 1999; Kabir, 2011).

### Gendered Violence in Indian Literary Studies

Critical scholarship emphasizes how women's writing in India negotiates patriarchy, caste discrimination, and sexual violence. Works like Uma Chakravarti's *Gendering Caste* situate gendered violence within caste hierarchies, while Indira Chowdhury's *Representing Violence* explores narrative strategies in Indian fiction (Chakravarti, 2003; Chowdhury, 2012). Feminist critics argue that literature not only exposes violence but also functions as a site of resistance against hegemonic discourses.

### Gendered Violence in Indian Society

#### Patriarchy and Cultural Norms

Patriarchy in India manifests through systems like dowry, honor codes, and family honor, often sanctioning violence against women. The National Crime Records Bureau reported that in 2024, over 300,000 cases of crimes against women were recorded in India including domestic violence, rape, kidnapping, and dowry deaths (*NCRB Crime in India*, 2024).

#### Silence and Stigma

Survivors often face social stigma and familial pressure to remain silent. Shame culture, coupled with victim-blaming narratives, reinforces cycles of violence. In literature, silence becomes both a theme and a narrative gesture -representing suffering and its suppression.

### Literature as Witness: Case Studies

#### 1. Mahasweta Devi: Chronicling Casteed Violence

Mahasweta Devi's short stories, such as "Draupadi," foreground intersectional violence - where caste and gender jointly shape oppression. In *Draupadi*, Devi narrates the public humiliation of a tribal woman by upper-caste men. Instead of portraying Draupadi as passive, Devi gives her a fierce voice and resistance. Draupadi's refusal to die, demanding justice and agency, becomes a testimony against systemic violence. Devi writes: "She walked head held high, showing them her face-they must look at her!" (Devi, 1997)

#### 2. Urmila Pawar: Autobiographical Testimony in *The Weave of My Life*

Urmila Pawar's memoir *The Weave of My Life* (translated by Maya Pandit) offers a narrative that operates as both personal and collective memory. Her account of sexual harassment and social exclusion brutalizes the reader precisely through its specificity. By telling her own story, Pawar transcends individual pain to highlight structural inequalities faced by Dalit women.

Her recollections reveal how violence infiltrates domestic spaces and internalize humiliation, making her testimony a political act.

### 3. Arundhati Roy: *The God of Small Things* and Communal Violence

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* intertwines personal histories with larger socio-political violence, including sexual violence and caste discrimination. Roy's narrator uses non-linear storytelling and poetic imagery to unfold traumatic events, particularly Ammu's experiences of sexual violation. The repetition, fragmentation, and lyrical language reflect trauma's resistance to conventional narrative closure -aligning with Caruth's theory that trauma cannot be fully articulated but can be witnessed through language (Caruth, 1996).

Roy writes: "They all broke the law. They all broke her heart. The History House... swallowed her up" (Roy, 1997). The collapsing of personal suffering into historical space underscores the systemic nature of gendered violence.

### 4. Meena Kandasamy: *When I Hit You*

Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* is a searing autobiographical novel that documents intimate partner violence and the politics of patriarchal control. Kandasamy's narrative style raw, direct, and unflinching resists aestheticizing violence. Instead, it confronts the reader with repetitive cycles of abuse, reflecting the rhythmic effects of trauma. The protagonist's fight for selfhood and autonomy becomes a testament to resilience.

Kandasamy writes: "I will not speak. I will not cry. I will not give you the satisfaction." This assertion of refusal becomes a political act of witnessing itself.

Narrative Strategies: How Literature Represents Violence

#### Fragmentation and Non-Linear Structure

Trauma narratives often disrupt linear storytelling-mirroring the disorientation of traumatic memory. Roy's and Kandasamy's works exemplify this by weaving past and present, association and dissociation.

#### Witnessing through Language and Silence

Silence-both literal and narrative-becomes a strategy of representation. In Pawar's and Devi's texts, silence often precedes or follows violence, indicating social compulsion to forget and the writer's attempt to remember.

#### Embodied Pain and Aesthetic Resistance

Pain in these narratives is not ornamental; it is embodied. Indian writers often refuse to aestheticize suffering, instead anchoring narrative in lived, corporeal experience.

#### Literature's Social Impact

##### Creating Public Discourse

Works like *The God of Small Things* and *When I Hit You* sparked public conversations on gendered violence in India, challenging silence and stigma.

#### Resistance and Solidarity

Literary testimonies create communities of empathy. Readers encounter pain not as voyeurism but as ethical engagement recognizing the agency of survivors.

### Transformation of Social Imaginaries

By narrating experiences of gendered violence, literature reshapes how society conceptualizes accountability, justice, and healing.

### Critiques and Limitations

Some critics argue that literature risks sensationalizing pain or reinforcing voyeurism. Others note that elite publishing circles often privilege certain voices. Intersectional approaches must remain attentive to caste, class, sexuality, and regional specificity.

### Conclusion

Indian literature functions as witness-exposing gendered violence, giving a voice to survivors, and challenging entrenched structures of power. Through diverse narrative strategies, writers make pain legible without reducing subjects to mere victims. They call readers into ethical engagement, recognizing both suffering and resilience. In this witnessing, literature becomes not only art but a force for social transformation.

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